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Case Title

Researching Organizational Coaching Using a Pilot Study

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Christine Eastman is a Senior Lecturer at Middlesex University where she works with a number of UK and international businesses. Her research focuses on how literary works can be used as a pedagogical tool in businesses and with students from outside of the humanities disciplines. Her book *Improving Workplace Learning by Teaching Literature* (Springer, 2016) examines how the reading and study of essays and novels can enhance student learning. She is currently working on *Coaching for Professional Development: Using Literature to Support Success*, a book that examines how literary works can transform coaching practice, which is due for release by Routledge in 2018.

Published Books

Eastman, Christine A. (forthcoming 2018) *Coaching for Professional Development: using literature to support success* (London: Routledge)

Eastman, Christine A. (2016) *Improving Workplace Learning by Teaching Literature: towards Wisdom.* (London: Springer) ISBN 978-3-319– 29026-3

Published Journal articles (relevant to either literature or coaching and literature)

Eastman, Christine A. (2016) "Coaching in Organisations: how fictional characters can develop coaching practice" *The International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*. 5:4, 318-33. http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/IJMCE-06-2016-0048?af=R

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Abstract

This case explores the practical difficulties of designing a pilot to investigate the effectiveness of an innovative coaching technique. It weighs up the strengths and limitations of using a pilot study to research organizational coaching and reflects on the extent to which such a study can provide satisfactory answers to a series of research questions in the field of organizational coaching. The case goes on to explore how an initial pilot study with a limited number of participants might be amplified to provide a more solid empirical basis on which to answer the research questions more authoritatively.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case students should be able to:

- Formulate research questions and reflect on appropriate methodologies to answer them;
- Evaluate the advantages of conducting a pilot study before embarking on a wider research project;
- Understand the value and limitations of using a pilot study to conduct research in organizational coaching.

Researching Organizational Coaching Using a Pilot Study

Students setting out in the vast, uncharted, almost mystical realm of academic research tend to have a fairly good idea of the broad area they want to study. After all, you tend to find yourself going down the path of research once you have decided there is something you would like to find out more about, some received ideas you think need correcting, something that needs saying and that has not been said before. I think this is why most people go into research: they have something they want to say, a voice they want to find, and academic research provides an institutional and disciplinary framework for finding that voice and for articulating that thing. But then students, as soon as they have taken that bold step of deciding they want to pursue research on a given subject, come up against the unforgiving, bleak landscape of research questions and methodologies, quantifiable results, quantitative analyses, statistical proofs, and conclusions. Academic research can seem daunting for beginners and indeed it is designed to be so: in order to make a contribution to a given field of knowledge you have to learn the language and code of that discipline. No matter how good your ideas, they are not going anywhere unless you can set them out according to the framework of knowledge production in a given field, which is just a fancy way of saying you need to learn to talk like an academic. In this case I am going to be discussing the very first stage of any research project, that first hurdle in the production of knowledge. I am going to be discussing this initial stage in the context of my own research in organizational coaching. I will begin by explaining my own research interests and what led me to discover I wanted to pursue this kind of research. I

will then explain how I went about formulating research questions and began to think about the methods I would use to answer those questions. I will set out my reasons for using a pilot study to provide some tentative answers to my questions and to think more deeply about how I would design my study. Much of what I have to say, although specific to the field of coaching and analogous practice-based disciplines, is relevant for anyone embarking on a research journey who is beginning to think about what they want to study and how they will go about doing it. My aim is to demystify the research process as far as possible, to show how researchers come up with ideas and how they put them into practice in the very earliest stages.

The Journey to a Field of Research

The decision to study some area or another is largely dictated by the disciplinary and personal background of any given researcher. This might seem a rather obvious point to make, but it is nevertheless important. Our background, our academic interests, where we have studied before, and who we have studied with have an immeasurable impact on the path our research takes us. Our object of study is, to a certain extent, largely mapped out in advance by our academic formation to date, which means that the area we decide to study is an intuitive choice. Perhaps it would help if I use my own background to illustrate this point and to elucidate its consequences. I came to my current academic research from a background in teaching English and American literature. I am familiar with a range of literary texts and have recognized their power and usefulness in explaining syntax, imagery, irony, ambiguity, and lexical considerations to students. When I began to work in the field of coaching with senior executives and other professionals on postgraduate inquiries into their coaching practice, my own approach to the topic of coaching was filtered through my experience as a teacher of literature. When I saw my coaching students struggle with the day-to-day realities of coaching other professionals in the workplace, my ideas about how to resolve the issues they were facing were informed by my prior background. My students are sales professionals who are gaining master's degrees in sales by completing projects that examine ways to improve an aspect

of their practice. Many of these students act as coaches and mentors in their workplace, and it is this aspect of their work that they choose to focus on in the projects they complete under my supervision.

When I began to think about how I could help these coaching students to reflect more deeply on the ways that they might improve their coaching practice, I was led almost inevitably by my own background, to the idea of using literary works. Often my students discussed communication problems in the workplace, coaching dialogues breaking down because of uncommunicative interlocutors, the difficulty of facing the elephant in the room when dealing with colleagues who were being coached to improve their performance. Their anecdotes of these failures in coaching practice over the years led me to the realization that perhaps they could use works of literature in their coaching dialogues as a means of ameliorating some of these communication issues, as a way of strengthening their coaching practice, and as a tool for enhancing their work as coaches. I had, therefore, found my area of research: I wanted to explore coaching in organizations and how it could be improved by bringing works of literature – novels, plays, poems, the whole wealth of creative writing – into the office. I wanted to use my students as the guinea pigs, so to speak, to see if this idea of using literature in workplace coaching could work. In their day-to-day activity as coaches, my students would examine in their master's degree projects how a literary work of their choice might be used to enhance coaching dialogue, and they would report back to me through the data they collated in their final projects. I had my idea, then, but this was only the beginning of the story. I still had all those tricky research questions and methodological thorn bushes to cross.

Coming Up with Research Questions

I knew I wanted to find out whether, as I suspected, creative literary works could have an impact on coaching in organizations. The overarching aim of my research project seemed self-evident. Phrased as a question, it might be formulated thus: Can literary works play a role in organizational coaching?

But such a question seemed so broad that it was almost daunting at first. What I needed was to break down my general research aim into a series of objectives that would eventually culminate in my being able to answer my overarching question. What began as one broad question that was virtually impossible to answer could be anatomized in bite-sized chunks: one general question spilled over into a series of subsidiary research questions:

- What research has been conducted to date on using creative literature in businesses and in coaching?
- What kind of things do my students working in organizations read and how open are they to the idea of using fictional works in their coaching practice? What on-the-ground insights might they be able to share?
- How might one go about using literature in a coaching dialogue?
- How might one measure the impact of using literature in coaching?

My four subsidiary research questions seemed like a logical scaffold that once I had climbed would enable me to answer that daunting overall research question I had set myself. Now that I had my questions I was of course faced with next significant hurdle: how actually to go about answering them.

Methodologies

In my own teaching experience I find that the term methodology tends to confound students who have only recently disembarked in the mysterious terra incognita of academic research. Among the wealth of academic jargon that mystifies new researchers, methodology is often the most problematic. Students in the social sciences sometimes become lost in the various methods of conducting research. The terminology – action research, grounded theory, phenomenology, mixed methods – can seem forbidding. There are of course seminal guides, such as Flick's (2015) and Silverman's (2016) handbooks that help to map out the intricacies of embarking on research and that offer helpful pointers for green researchers. But methodology is quite simply a description of

the way you intend to go about answering your research question. Just as a researcher's initial field of study and interest tends to be determined by his or her background, methodology is largely determined by the research questions themselves. Each of my research questions seemed to call for a specific technique, process, or method that could be used to produce a satisfactory answer. In the remainder of this case I will deal with each question in turn and will explain my rationale for selecting the methods I chose to answer my research questions. These research questions and the methodology I applied in the process of answering them provide an anatomy of my research project in its earliest stages. They show the ups and downs, victories and mistakes of the early research process and thereby offer a wealth of examples, of both a positive and negative nature, for researchers setting out on their journey in the social sciences.

- What research has been conducted to date on using creative literature in businesses and in coaching?

My first research question called for an investigation into what others had said before on my topic, either directly or tangentially, and was in a sense the angular stone for the construction of my research edifice. In order to add my own voice to a field, I needed to know what others had been saying so I could begin to find my own position among them and to determine the exact nature of what my contribution to this field could be. My method here would be what is often termed a literature review. A literature review is a necessary preliminary stage for both new and seasoned researchers alike. Most new researchers are required to produce an explicit review section in their projects. Seasoned researchers often conduct their review of literature implicitly: they have been reading around their subject for years and their review is, in a sense, all this background reading that they have kept simmering away to keep up to date with their disciplines. In either case, a literature review is the sine qua non of academic research. Such a review is not a "furniture inventory" or a list of everything in a given area of inquiry. In my own case, I did not have to compile everything that had ever been written on coaching in organizations. I simply needed to find the points where the academic conversation overlapped with my newly found focus of interest and to find a way of

adding my voice to that academic conversation. I was finding a gap in the literature while I provided a “spine” or “backbone” to my project that helped to situate my own hypothesis – that literary works could transform organizational coaching – within the scholarly discourse, agreements, disagreements, and prevailing trends in research on coaching.

- What kind of things do my students working in organizations read and how open are they to the idea of using fictional works in their coaching practice? What on-the-ground insights might they be able to share?

The next question I needed to answer would help to test the ground for my research project. Was there any appetite for using literary works in coaching? I needed to find out from the coaches themselves – my students – to begin to understand if my research project was truly feasible. My literature review had told me that there was little work that had been done on this area, but also that Robert Coles’s (1989) research on exposing students from outside of the humanities disciplines to the insights that can be gained from literary reading was a striking precedent that seemed to justify the rationale underlying my research project. My initial review of literature also told me that innovative coaching ideas like my own often came up against substantial resistance in workplace environments, with rigid codes of practice and settled ways of doing things. Was my wacky idea really going to go anywhere? I needed to ask the experts themselves, the coaches in the organizations who would, if I thought this project could work, be tasked with putting it into action. A semi-structured interview seemed the most efficient method for gleaning this information from my students. An interview with a set of basic questions, but also room to pursue new lines of inquiry as they emerged in the discussion, would allow me to build up the kind of “thick description” (Geertz 1973) of the organizational coaching environment that was necessary for me to begin to think about how I would put my project into practice.

- How might one go about using literature in a coaching dialogue?

My semi-structured interviews with my coaching students fed directly into the next stage of my research project: the design of an innovative pedagogical tool that could be used to transform

coaching in organizations. The results of my interviews told me a number of things and raised some significant hurdles that I knew I would have to cross, if the next stages of my research were to achieve a degree of success. On the whole, my series of interviews told me that my coaching students were, in the main, mature students and experienced professionals who were time poor and not academically confident yet enthusiastic about the opportunities to study and explore their practice. I had discovered that these time-poor students were not particularly avid readers. My students were also able to tell me that they suspected the people they coached in the workplace did not care for reading much either. This initial finding was, needless to say, a spanner in the works: if neither my coaches nor the people they were coaching read in their leisure time, how could I possibly get them to read at work? But the hurdle was not insurmountable: although they were not experienced or comfortable readers, although they came from scientific and social science-based disciplines that did not encourage literary reading, surely there were ways that I could entice them to read, by making the reading activities more manageable and accessible for time-poor professionals like them. This was now the implementation stage of my research project: I had already found out the ways in which the current literature supported my own hypothesis about literature in coaching; thanks to my interviews I had also found out my students' opinions regarding reading in general, their attitudes towards literature, and the obstacles my project would have to overcome. Based on these prior stages I was able to design a pilot project by which I would design a literary reading activity for my student coaches to use with their coaches in the organizations. The pilot was based on an extract from Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" (1856). "Bartleby" is a nineteenth-century short work of fiction that depicts a lawyer who hires a man who proceeds to do less and less of what he is asked to do ("I would prefer not to" is the celebrated response he gives to workplace requests) until the whole office is disrupted, his colleagues inconvenienced and his boss, the lawyer, mystified and enraged. Surely "Bartleby" offered the perfect fictional scenario to discuss problematic behaviors in the workplace. The

eponymous protagonist of the story offers an extreme example of dysfunctional attitudes in the workplace. Here is the extract I asked my coaching students to use with their coachees:

> “Bartleby! quick, I am waiting.”
>
> I heard a slow scrape of his chair legs on the uncarpeted floor, and soon he appeared standing at the entrance of his hermitage.
>
> “What is wanted?” said he mildly.
>
> “The copies, the copies,” said I hurriedly. “We are going to examine them. There”—and I held towards him the fourth quadruplicate.
>
> “I would prefer not to,” he said, and gently disappeared behind the screen.
>
> For a few moments I was turned into a pillar of salt, standing at the head of my seated column of clerks. Recovering myself, I advanced towards the screen, and demanded the reason for such extraordinary conduct. “Why do you refuse?”
>
> “I would prefer not to.”
>
> With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust him ignominiously from my presence. But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner touched and disconcerted me. I began to reason with him. “These are your own copies we are about to examine. It is labor saving to you, because one examination will answer for your four papers. It is common usage. Every copyist is bound to help examine his copy. Is it not so? Will you not speak? Answer!”
>
> “I prefer not to,” he replied in a flute-like tone. It seemed to me that while I had been addressing him, he carefully revolved every statement that I made; fully comprehended the meaning; could not gainsay the irresistible conclusions; but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevailed with him to reply as he did.
>
> “You are decided, then, not to comply with my request—a request made according to common usage and common sense?”

> He briefly gave me to understand that on that point my judgment was sound. Yes: his decision was irreversible. It is not seldom the case that when a man is browbeaten in some unprecedented and violently unreasonable way, he begins to stagger in his own plainest faith. He begins, as it were, vaguely to surmise that, wonderful as it may be, all the justice and all the reason is on the other side. Accordingly, if any disinterested persons are present, he turns to them for some reinforcement for his own faltering mind.
>
> "Turkey," said I, "what do you think of this? Am I not right?"
>
> "With submission, sir," said Turkey, with his blandest tone, "I think that you are."
>
> "Nippers," said I, "what do you think of it?"
>
> "I think I should kick him out of the office." (Melville, 1969, 48 – 9).

As part of my pilot study I asked a group of twelve of my students to conduct a case study in which they would use this extract from "Bartleby" as a means of initiating a coaching dialogue with an uncooperative employee. I encouraged my students to use Robert Yin's (2009) work on case study as a guide to report back to me on the ups and downs of their coaching exercise with "Bartleby". Did the extract help them to broach difficult workplace discussions? Did the text provide a humorous way of alluding to the coachees' own behavior? Were the coachees able to identify themselves in the text and to reflect more deeply on their workplace performance as a result of the character Barteby's negative example? I wanted my students to produce a case study as a way of providing rich details and thick description to tackle the multifaceted task that I had set them. I particularly wanted them to use Yin's "exploratory approach" (2009) to help me understand more about this area I wanted to investigate. Their case study would give me "a snapshot of a situation and/or phenomenon at a particular time" (Taylor & Thomas-Gregory, 2014, p. 38). My students' case studies would be tasked with duty of "bringing together [...] findings in ways that allow the reader to understand and thus make decisions about its transferability to their own context" (Taylor & Gregory, 2015, 40). After compiling and analyzing the results from my twelve students' case studies I

would have an initial idea of the future direction my research on using literature in organizational coaching might take, and if, indeed, the idea had any future.

- How might one measure the impact of using literature in coaching?

The results of my pilot study, which I shall report on briefly here, are, in a sense, both an ending and a beginning. They are an ending in the sense that this research case ends with this final section, which provides a neat tail end to this summary of how I set about approaching a new topic of research and outlines how I decided to use a pilot study to investigate the area I was interested in. These results are also the beginning in the sense that I went on to use the pilot to develop a fully-fledged project on using literature in organizational coaching, which I am still in the process of conducting. My aim in the research case I report on here is to give a snapshot of the first stages of my research project, to show how I arrived at my decisions and to illustrate what went well, what went wrong, and why.

With regard to providing evidence of the viability of integrating literature into organizational coaching, my pilot study achieved mixed results. Much of the negative feedback I received regarding the effectiveness of the "Bartleby" extract as a coaching tool can actually be attributed to methodological errors in the design of my pilot study, which, of course, is a testament to the necessity of conducting a pilot study in the first place. Such a study helps to test the water, so to speak, to gauge the viability of a more wide-ranging project before substantial time and resources have been spent on something that might not work. A pilot study can be a way of gaining more substantial institutional backing; it can be the basis for being awarded a book contract; it can provide preliminary results that help influence the future direction of research.

So let's see what failed to work then. First of all, "Bartleby" was tough. I should have paid more attention to the findings of my semi-structured interviews to learn that Herman Melville's sophisticated use of language and his depiction of an alien nineteenth-century world would be a substantial, perhaps even insurmountable challenge for readers without training and practice. Simply put, the text I had used in my pilot was too difficult for the coaches and coachees in the

organizations in which they were working. And because the text had been my own choice, dictated largely by personal preference, the coaches themselves did not have the emotional and cognitive investment in the extract to make it work in their coaching sessions. According to the case studies produced by my coaching students, many of their coachees responded to the Melville excerpt too literally, treating it as a depiction of a real-life coaching problem, rather than as a figurative way of alluding to more general workplace problems – apathy, hostility, de-motivation, poor performance. My pilot study taught me that I would have to find innovative ways of making texts work in coaching sessions. I would have to choose texts that spoke to coachees in ways that other media did not and I would have to devise ways of getting the coachees to respond productively to texts, rather than merely responding to the text as the depiction of a workplace problem that required a mundane solution: "he should be sacked," or "I would refer the case to HR," or "I think Bartleby needs a therapist, not a coach."

But I did also discover some positive things in my pilot study. I learned that students from large global and UK based organizations are frustrated and discontented with many traditional coaching models and are eager to explore more creative ways of coaching. In some of the reports I discovered that the "Bartleby" excerpt did indeed capture the imagination of some coachees and set them on a course of self-reflection far more profound than that which they had shown in the coaching sessions prior to the one using the literary excerpt. However, my pilot study also revealed some of the limitations of my methodological tools for gauging the impact of the literary excerpt on the coaching dialogue. My results did not tell me if there were any long-term benefits to the use of an excerpt of a fictional work in order to elicit coaching dialogue. From my students' case studies I had anecdotal reports of the effectiveness of the excerpt in eliciting profound reflection in a select number of students, but the pilot of one coaching session was insufficient to provide a longitudinal perspective on improved coaching dialogue or workplace performance improvement. Moreover, my method used for data collection – the case studies compiled by my students – while informative, only gave me part of the story. The case studies did not tell me what the coachees themselves

thought of the sessions, whether they found the sessions useful, whether they perceived the literary excerpt to have been more effective in eliciting their reflection. In order to answer my overarching research question – Can literary works play a role in organizational coaching? – I needed more substantial, quantifiable results than those afforded by the pilot study. I decided in my overall research project I would need surveys of coachees who had undertaken the literary exercise before and after such sessions; I would need data to measure their performance over a longer period of time, looking for dips and troughs that might indicate the general effectiveness of my particularly coaching strategy; I needed hands-on sessions with coachees themselves, and to build a relationship with these coachees around an examination of literary texts.

I had set myself a mammoth task. My pilot study had neither proved nor necessarily disproved my hypothesis that fictional characters could be used as a simulative threshold between coaching theory and practice. A character such as Bartleby evidently embodies some of the disturbing personalities encountered in the workplace, and some of the coachees responded strongly to this character in their own process of self-reflection. The literary excerpt had given coachees the opportunity to reflect on themes such as self-determination, power, leadership, and independence in the coaching process, and a number of them had availed themselves of this opportunity, according to my students' case studies. The fictional example had clearly helped some of my coaching students to explore workplace identity by presenting a rich source of insight on human dynamics. But how could I get a clearer idea of the benefits of the literary exercise and, more importantly, how was I to articulate and to provide empirical evidence of these benefits? My pilot study had opened a whole new panorama of research in which I was just beginning to find my footing. It was going to be a long haul before I finally had the confidence to answer my research question with authority.

Discussion Questions

1. Would you have conducted the pilot study differently? What methods might the researcher have used to gain a more comprehensive overview of the effectiveness of using literary works in coaching sessions?

2. How might the pilot study be redesigned in order to incorporate more quantitative measures of impact, in addition to the qualitative measures provided by the use of case study?

3. Imagine you are a coach who has brilliant new idea that you think can revolutionize coaching practice in organizations. How would you go about proving its effectiveness? Reflect specifically on your research questions and how you would pair these up with an appropriate methodology.

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